

## “‘I Can’t Sing.’ : A Close Reading of Bigger Thomas’ Dissonance in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*”

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To sing is “to utter words or sounds [. . .] with musical modulations” (Random House Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary). Singing involves melody; melody suggests harmony; harmony denotes “agreement,” or conformity. No such harmony exists in the life of Bigger Thomas, the central character of Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. In Bigger’s environment, the stereotypical image of the “happy darkie,” which survived the institution of slavery, is alive and vivid in the minds of whites. This fact is implicitly manifested in the particular scene in which Jan and Mary—two young, white, misdirected liberals—discuss “*Negroes*” and their perceived natural ebullience. This very scene embodies one of the novel’s major themes: the preconception and stereotyping of each race by the other. “Say, Bigger, can you sing?” asks Mary (77). This is the same Bigger Thomas who lives in a world of stereotypes, who is perceived as one of a group—one who has been denied individuality and is shackled by racial restraints which confine him and literally negate any possible educational and economic opportunities or aspirations. This is the same Bigger who is expected to conform to the expectations prescribed by a society which does not see him as a real human being. It is no wonder that this same Bigger Thomas answers Mary, “**I can’t sing**” (77).

Mary’s effusion, “*They* have so much emotion!” (77) refers to a group—the black race—which she obviously considers to be separate from herself and her world. The second-person pronoun, “*they*,” represents “people in general.” Referred to as “a people” by Mary, “*Negroes*” are again characterized as “a tribe” or “a race,” detached from the mainstream. To her, “*a people*” are not truly human as are her friends or family. “*A people*” is an entity to be studied—**something** set aside to be examined and scrutinized. Mary reveals her narrowness again when she says, “If we could ever *get them going*. . . (77) meaning, ***if we could ever get them operating. . . moving. . . progressing***—likening blacks to automata, implying complacency or inertia on the part of “a people,” indicating acceptance of her “responsibility” for the “White man’s burden.”

One of these attributes is “*emotion*,” or intense feeling. Had Mary possessed true discernment, she might have concluded that Bigger Thomas, one of the “*they*” which she was considering, one of the “*they*” which she was discussing as though he were not even there, indeed, had “*emotion*.” Ironically, the feelings

associated with “emotion” can run the gamut from positive to negative, from love to hate, with a myriad of variations and degrees in between. Unfortunately, Bigger’s enveloping emotion is *hate* fueled by *fear*. Jan’s assertion, “*They’ve got spirit. . .*” (77), reinforces the assumption that “Negroes” possess a natural “liveliness,” an unrelenting effervescence. The problem is, however, as Jan sees it, “*They’ve got to be organized*” (77), presuming that “they” lack the ability to do so on their own initiative; consequently, “*they*” need overseers to insure that all their “*emotion*” and “*spirit*” are channeled properly to “give the *Party* something it needs” (77). As Jan sees it, “We can’t have a revolution without ‘em” (77). This idea of a *revolution* provides more irony. In this case, it speaks to Wright’s political agenda.

Wright is seemingly making a statement about the Communist Party, with which he was associated for a short period. Though blacks did join the Party, it certainly means nothing to Bigger Thomas. He cannot assimilate the idea of blacks doing anything with whites. Like Mary, he cannot see whites as people, let alone realize possible relationships with them. How can he be a part of an organization when the members of this same organization are those who restrain his individuality? To him, Communist propaganda means nothing. Thus, Wright demonstrates the futility and irrationality of Bigger’s situation. (Ultimately, the Communist Party ideology did not serve Wright’s ambitions, either.) The “*we*,” though members of the Party, are also members of the society which controls Bigger Thomas and black people in general. What “*we*” really need is numbers—people to boost the population of the Party—people to fight in the “*revolution*”—a new system of government—but to benefit whom?

When Bigger says that he “*can’t sing*,” both Mary’s and Jan’s renditions of the spiritual “Swing Low” fall short. As Bigger thinks to himself, “*That ain’t the tune*” (77), he is smugly scornful and sarcastic—“smile[s] derisively” (77)—because he recognizes that neither Jan nor Mary knows or understands “the tune.” Neither of them has a clue as to the real lives of black people. This excerpt underscores the preconceptions held by the pair. To them, especially to Mary, singing is experiencing blackness: “Their songs—the spirituals [are] marvelous!” (77). In her primitivist ignorance, Mary perpetuates the “happy darkie” concept and the plantation tradition with her insistence upon singing a Negro spiritual. After all, “*they*” own “their songs”; “their songs” symbolize what “they” are and how “they” live. She exhibits her limited, book-learned knowledge of black people when she warbles two lines of the spiritual and uses what she thinks is “Negro” dialect: “fer” (77). (Sadly, Mary’s singing could be

interpreted as a foreshadowing of her own death.) Bigger, conversely, rejects the Negro spiritual and all that it represents (in two instances, he recoils when he happens upon his mother singing). He cannot, as do his mother and a multitude of other black people, embrace something which represents to him a negative conformity. By rejecting the spirituals, he rejects also the institution of religion which some whites—beginning with the slave traders—use to keep men like him “in their place.”

Bigger Thomas, too, having his own preconceptions, can only fathom a surface relationship, a working relationship with whites. There can be, in his mind, no real communication or interaction between blacks and whites—save what occurs between bosses and workers. The white world has only been accessible to Bigger Thomas through movies and work experience. It is an illusion—an illusion which he envies but keeps at a distance from himself. (Unfortunately, this is an illusion which Booker T. Washington’s philosophy helped to preserve. The notion of blacks securing independence and civil rights by *working* contributed mightily to the Black Migration. Thousands of potential Biggers and their families scurried North in search of economic freedom only to find a variation of “slavery.”) Bigger knows that men are separated on the basis of skin color; on the other side, well-meaning Jan fails to understand the real Bigger. He doesn’t realize that his friendliness towards Bigger only makes Bigger more uncomfortable and enlarges the chasm between blacks and whites that is already firmly established in Bigger’s consciousness. Bigger knows that he will never really be accepted by a white man as his equal. For Mary Dalton, “knowing” blackness is a fad—a game that she can choose to play or not to play. She doesn’t understand blacks and has no idea of the magnitude of her question, “Can you sing?” She doesn’t realize that Bigger’s “melody” is fear and his “tune” is hatred. He doesn’t accept the “tune” of conformity “played” upon him by those who don’t know him. By contrast, his life is dissonant. “*I can’t sing*” (77), Bigger declares **again**.